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C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 000431

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG, DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PBTS](#) [PHUM](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: AUTONOMY, INTEGRATION, AND
SEPARATION

REF: A. 05 RABAT 2262

[1](#)B. RABAT 240 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)C. RABAT 238

Classified By: Pol/C Timothy Lenderking, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: During the mission's last visit to the Western Sahara in late January, and in a subsequent conversation with the Mayor of Laayoune in Rabat, emboffs have had opportunities to engage with local officials, NGOs, and other contacts concerning their views on autonomy, integration, and independence. While views differ on the way forward, contacts confirm there is a "buzz" in the city of Laayoune concerning autonomy, triggered by the King's December speech (Ref A) and call on political parties and NGOs to weigh on the Sahara issue. While there may be a vigorous discussion emerging, with many people eager to communicate their views to the palace, most of our contacts, including the Wali and Mayor of Laayoune, have been unclear as to how they are meant to do so. Summing up the point that the consultations remain thus far a palace-managed affair, with uneven initiative from the parties themselves, the Mayor told us plaintively on March 6 that "I have not been consulted yet." End Summary.

The Wali: Voice of the GOM

[1](#)2. (C) During a January 25 meeting with the Wali of Laayoune, Driss Sharqi, covering a number of issues (reftels), Emboffs and visiting NEA/MAG Desk Officer Ewing sought to engage the Wali on his views on autonomy. Sharqi adhered closely to the GOM party line, referring to the Western Sahara as the "southern provinces." He countered criticism of human rights by stressing that the GOM guarantees human rights and that the GOM development plan of the "southern province" is one which integrates economic and social needs with the people's aspirations.

[1](#)3. (C) According to Sharqi, the GOM is actively engaged in the process of developing an autonomy plan for the Western Sahara which is to be submitted to the UN in April. He understands the Algerian position to be the same as the Polisario's, and he thinks it is too "concrete." For Sharqi, the autonomy plan is part of the "evolutionary process of

effective democracy" which started under King Hassan II (Note: Sharqi's phrasing was very similar to that used by King Mohammed VI in recent speeches. End Note.) Sharqi spun the autonomy plan as resolving an issue that were it to continue would breed terrorism among the Polisario and foster instability in Mauritania and the Sahel.

¶4. (C) When asked about the role of the political parties and particularly the role of the Islamist PJD in formulating an autonomy plan, Sharqi said that the GOM is consistently in dialogue with the parties and that the Western Sahara is only one of many issues discussed.

A Peaceful Solution: Is it integration?

¶5. (C) Like the Wali, who clearly thinks the Western Sahara is part of Morocco's territorial integrity, so does Mohamed Larhdaf Eddah, the director of Laayoune regional television and a former reporter for AFP and himself a Sahrawi. For Eddah, Western Sahara has historical links to Morocco and not to Algeria. Eddah expressed that he wants a peaceful solution to the issue of the Western Sahara that will allow all residents to benefit from the territory's resources.

¶6. (C) Eddah's peaceful vision for the way ahead in the Western Sahara would include freedom of expression, an independent judiciary, preservation of Sahrawi culture, and revenue-sharing of natural resources of the region. Eddah emphasized that with a 29 percent unemployment rate, there is potential discontent in the Sahara, whose only fix is economic stability. He mentioned the possibility of developing tourism, drawing visitors from the Canary Islands,

which he said are "overbooked." In fact, he said, the Canary Islands Chamber of Commerce has suggested a free investment zone in the Western Sahara.

¶7. (C) Defining himself as a pacifist, Eddah said he is trying to avoid extremes and is attempting to promote dialogue; thus he started a regional television station in ¶2005. The television station, he said, presents everyone's side, including the Polisario's. The Polisario, however, did not like the fact that all sides were presented, something that contributed to the series of demonstrations since May (Comment: we will take a closer look at the content of this regional television station to assess Eddah's various claims. End Comment).

¶8. (C) According to Eddah, people are not yet talking about an autonomy plan because there is nothing substantial available for them to discuss. What information is available is from Algeria and local Polisario members, both of whom discuss the politics of the situation rather than the social and economic aspects.

¶9. (C) The preservation of Sahrawi culture is important to Eddah. He discussed "Hassaniyya culture," the tribal confederation identification, rather than "Sahrawi culture." Mali, Mauritania, Algeria and Morocco all have Hassaniyya in them, totaling approximately five million. Morocco, however, has failed to capitalize on this fact, according to Eddah. To preserve Hassaniyya culture, Eddah suggested a unified approach bringing in academics and universities. He did emphasize, though, that the approaches taken and the methodologies employed would need to be well-defined. Part of the discussion on the Hassaniyya concerned women, who, according to Eddah, are more advanced than their Moroccan counterparts. Eddah said that polygamy is not practiced in the Sahara, there is no violence in the family, and divorce is permissible.

¶10. (C) Eddah compared the situation of the Hassaniyya to the Berber who with three different groups (that is the Rif, Middle Atlas and Soussi) have successfully banded together, and, resolved their problems with the GOM. For Eddah, the unity of a country means democracy and the first step would

be for truly democratic representation in the Western Sahara.

People would not return from the Tindouf camps before they have guarantees from the GOM, including real democracy.

¶11. (C) To emphasize his points, Eddah related his own history: he is originally from a village twenty-six kilometers south of Laayoune; his family was exiled to the south; and his father, a Polisario member, was imprisoned in Laayoune. Originally, Eddah was part of the GOM in Laayoune and a member of the Istiqlal party. In 1990, he became a journalist, and then last year established the television station.

Sahrawi NGOs: Are we integrated?

¶12. (C) Emboffs met with a group of Sahrawi NGOs on January 25, most of whose leaders were former members of the Polisario who either became disillusioned with the movement and fled or were caught trying to escape. Emboffs have met with some of the NGOs on previous visits and have found their pitch to vary little, as they are part of the official dog-and-pony show put on for outside visitors to the territory. These NGOs are pro-GOM and vehemently opposed to the Polisario and Algeria. Ahmed Khara, from the Association of the Parents of Sahrawi Victims, was initially a member of the Polisario. He spent fourteen years in prison in Tindouf; in 1995, he returned to Morocco with his family. T. Al Mousouwai represented the Sahrawi Tribute to Unity and Development; Nabit Raggas, representing the organization Sahrawi Flame, spent eight years in prison; and Ahmed Talougi, who spent ten years in Polisario prisons, represented the Association of Victims of Torture. There were representatives from the Association of the Disappeared (by the Polisario) and two youth/environmental organizations. They claimed the Polisario today is little more than a

"desert mafia," a band of traffickers in persons, drugs and guns.

¶13. (C) When asked about their views on autonomy, the representatives lapsed into denouncing the Polisario. They accused the organization of "brainwashing" youth, torturing people, serving as lackeys of Algeria, from whom they want reparations. While they stressed another (small) state in the region is not viable, only grudgingly did they support the King's autonomy plan, apparently favoring a merger with Morocco. Raggas pointed out that the world identifies three parties in the dispute over the Western Sahara -- Morocco, Algeria and the Polisario -- but does not talk about the Sahrawis. The NGO representatives defined themselves as part of a broader group, i.e., Hassaniyya, and compared their situation to that of the Kurds -- dispersed among other nations.

Sahrawi Dissidents: No autonomy -- independence only

¶14. (C) In a meeting with twelve Sahrawi dissidents the evening of January 25 (Ref C), the message was clear: no autonomy, only independence. While the dissidents could not articulate a vision of independence, it was clear that this group did not favor Moroccan involvement in the future. When asked specifically if they felt themselves to be part of a larger group of people, i.e., a Sahrawi nation, they said no -- the only people about whom they are concerned are those located in the Western Sahara (subtly disputing references to Hassaniyya culture made by others).

The PJD: Is it involved with the planning?

¶15. (C) Emboffs also discussed autonomy with PJD representative Brahim Eddaif, who expressed clearly a generational difference among residents of the Western

Sahara. He said his generation, i.e., people in their 40's, tolerated problems in the Western Sahara, today's youth will not, however. According to Eddaif, there is official and unofficial debate on the autonomy plan, but the south remains distrustful of the north. A January conference in Laayoune was held by the PJD in which representatives from Awsard, Boujdour, Dakhla and Laayoune prepared a plan, and, it is ready to be presented to the King and the government at the appropriate time.

¶16. (C) Eddaif said that the proposed autonomy plan is modeled after the Spanish and German systems which allow for regional justice systems and respect regional traditions, including those related to civil law. The autonomy plan would, according to Eddaif, be a political solution and officially end the conflict. He noted that the Western Sahara actually needs an economic development plan. Eddaif accused the GOM of favoring certain tribes, creating an elite and unequal distribution of wealth.

¶17. (C) Like Eddah, Eddaif does not think that the elected regional representatives serve the Sahrawi population adequately. Past elections were unfair and lacked transparency, according to Eddaif. When asked whether the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) still firmly controls the Western Sahara, Eddaif said "what we want is for the MOI to be involved only in security issues and leave politics and economic issues for political parties and civil society to deal with."

Mayor Of Laayoune

¶18. (C) During a March 6 call at his Rabat residence (where he clearly spends a good deal of his time), Laayoune Mayor Hani Henna Ould Er Rachida agreed there is considerable debate underway in the territory on the way forward for a political solution to the Western Sahara conflict. Sahrawis are impatient, he said, and full of expectation about the

coming months. He said the fifteen years since the cease-fire have been characterized by political stalemate, and as a result people are eager for progress. In the face of scant progress up to now, a political void has resulted, whose terms have been largely defined by the Polisario. Young people in the territory find Polisario rhetoric attractive because it offers a vision for the future. The GOM has brought development to the territory, but there has been inadequate coordination and involvement by Sahrawis. In the end, no one in the territory supports the status quo, despite the higher salaries and incentives to immigrate to the Sahara. The vast majority of the population wants real autonomy; a few want independence, the mayor acknowledged, but "no one" wants full integration with Morocco. The problem again is the political void that has resulted from the political stalemate; the Polisario has filled it by putting forward its own ideas, which are attractive to young people, many of whom lack a political vision of their own for the Western Sahara. Nevertheless, striking a decidedly reactive posture, the Mayor said that despite the buzz in Laayoune, "I have not yet been consulted on my ideas."

Political Party Activities Step Up

¶19. (C) Numerous political parties are apparently heeding the King's call for input and getting active in discussing the issue with their members and constituents. The PJD, for example, is teaming up with the smaller Citizen Forces (FC) party to host a conference in Rabat March 10-11 entitled "Regionalisation and Autonomy: Models and Lessons," to which numerous foreign experts (from Italy, Belgium, Germany, Canada, France, and Spain) have been invited. Istiqlal Secretary General Abbas el Fassi led a delegation of

government ministers to Laayoune the last week of February for meetings with tribal leaders and elected officials to exchange views on autonomy, and plans to visit the US in late March to discuss Morocco's ideas with US officials. Heads of major political parties reportedly briefed Palace advisors Mohamed Moatassim and Meziane Belfqih on March 2 on their deliberations thus far. Post will report in further detail on these events and offer further comment on the extent to which a genuine consultation is taking place.

Comment

¶20. (C) It is clear from our meetings that a discussion -- to what extent it is a debate is unclear -- on autonomy is underway in at least the urban areas of the Western Shara and has created a buzz in the territory. Broadly speaking the Sahrawi population is agitated by the lack of resolution of the conflict and articulates degrees of frustration with the GOM without necessarily embracing a desire for independence. Clearly there is an eagerness for greater political involvement among Sahrawis -- a say in the future -- and it remains to be seen to what extent the King's call for consultations will address that need. Whether agreeing with GOM claims to the territory or disputing them, contacts voiced a unifying theme that the GOM is still reluctant to fully open the political space for open debate, or to accord the territory a level of freedom of expression that exists in Morocco proper. Those not echoing the GOM party-line remain somewhat suppressed, even if their message is not one that necessarily favors the Polisario.

¶21. (U) NEA/MAG Ewing cleared this message.

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